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Cuba Today: A Nation Becoming a University

MRzine, 13 October 2005



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Introduction

Since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, this beautiful island in the Caribbean has aroused passions everywhere in the Americas. Since its inception, the revolution has had a profound impact on the popular classes throughout Latin America and haunted the political elites and wealthy classes in the United States and oligarchies elsewhere in the hemisphere. Admirers have often praised Cuba as the model for the future; its detractors have portrayed it as an oppressive regime. In reality, Cuba is neither heaven nor hell.

Instead, the revolution is a bold social experiment to find a way out of the underdevelopment that centuries of colonialism and neo-colonialism have imposed on Cuba, an effort to open a path toward a more just society than was possible under its pre-revolutionary domination by the United States. It is this quest that has brought on it the untiring enmity of U.S. governments for nearly a half-century now.

For forty-five years, ten U.S. administrations have sought to end the "threat" of a good example by subversion, sabotage, invasion, assassination, diplomatic isolation, economic embargo, propaganda, etc. The embargo -- which Cubans call a blockade because it also seeks to prevent other countries from trading with Cuba -- has cost the Cuban people well over \$72 billion to date. The Bay of Pigs invasion and the numerous acts of terror, launched mostly from U.S. soil, have taken 3,478 lives, making this a kind of slow-motion 9/11 (the proportional impact of which, given Cuba's small population, exceeds that of U.S. casualties in both the Korean and Vietnam wars). This little country has paid a heavy price for its independence.

It is against this backdrop of the forty-five-year siege that we have to view the realities of Cuba -- what the revolution has accomplished and what it has failed to do -- today.

And Cuba has accomplished a great deal. As Fidel Castro has said, "perhaps the most useful of our modest efforts in the struggle for a better world will be to demonstrate how much can be done with so little when all of society's human and material resources are placed at the service of the people." It is this theme -- doing so much with so little -- that I want to explore with specific reference to education and culture.

Education in Cuba

We are all familiar with the literacy program that was launched immediately after the triumph of the revolution. Young people were sent into the most remote corners of Cuba to teach basic literacy. Not only did this achieve universal literacy, it also raised the social consciousness of Cuba's youth. They too were educated by the experience. Cuba's *alphabetizacion* program is still today held up as a model by the United Nations because it required little in the way of material resources, building instead on the untapped human resources abundant in even the poorest of societies.

From that beginning, Cuba has gone on to build a strong educational system. [A 1998 UNESCO study of primary education throughout Latin America](#) found that, in test scores, completion rates, and literacy levels, Cuban primary students are at or near the top of a list of peers from across Latin America. Indeed, the performance of Cuban third and fourth graders in math and language so dramatically outstripped that of other nations that the UN task force administering the test returned to Cuba and tested students again to verify the initial results:

"Cuba far and away led the region in third- and fourth-grade mathematics and language achievement," the panel said. "Even the lowest fourth of Cuban students performed above the regional average." (Christopher Marquis, ["Cuba Leads Latin America in Primary Education, Study Finds,"](#) *New York Times*, [14 December 2001](#))

Today Cuba boasts one primary school teacher per twenty students and one junior high school teacher per fifteen students, making possible a very individualized pedagogy. There are schools in even the most remote areas of the country, sometimes with a teacher serving a single student in a school powered by solar panels.

The high quality of education in Cuba has been witnessed by the U.S. students I have taken there in recent years. They have been "blown away" by the university students they have met with, whom they find better informed, more articulate, and better able to reason than their U.S. counterparts. That is not exactly what they had expected to find in an "underdeveloped" society.

There is free education through the university, graduate and professional levels. As a result, today Cuba has the most highly educated and technically trained population in Latin America. There are more than 700,000 professionals who have been educated by the revolution who work in Cuba today.

One area in which Cuba is in fact highly developed is medicine. One telling indicator of this is the fact that last year Cuba's infant mortality rate was only [5.8](#) deaths in the first year per 1,000 births -- lower than in the U.S. Cuba has more doctors per capita than any other country in the world -- in all, some [130,000](#) healthcare professionals -- and has been able to send its medical personnel to assist in many of the poorest regions of the world. There were [25,845](#) Cuban doctors and health technicians working on humane missions of solidarity in [66](#) countries. There are [450](#) doctors in Haiti, the poorest country in the hemisphere, and a larger and growing number working in the poorest neighborhoods of Venezuela. President Castro was even able to offer to send over [1,500](#) doctors to the U.S. in response to the hurricane Katrina emergency -- an offer spurned by the Bush administration, unwilling to recognize that Cuba is a medical superpower.

And now through its [Latin American School of Medicine](#), it gives free medical educations to hundreds of poor youth from elsewhere in Latin America, Africa and [even the U.S.](#), with the sole stipulation that graduates return to those poor areas to practice medicine for the people. Cuba's medical education teaches not only the science and art of medicine, but also the social values of service to humanity. As Castro told the first graduating class of 1610 students this summer, "[H]uman capital is worth far more than the financial capital. Human capital involves not only knowledge, but also -- and this is essential -- conscience, ethics, solidarity, truly humane feelings, spirit of sacrifice, heroism, and the ability to make a little go a long way" (["At This Moment, Cuba Is Training More than 12,000 Doctors for the Third World,"](#) *Granma*, 23 August 2005).

By removing a major economic barrier to higher education, access has become highly meritocratic. As a result, women are now heavily represented in all the professions in Cuba. Well over half of the country's doctors, technicians, philosophers and other professionals are women.

New Social Problems

However, in the decade of the 1990s, two new social problems emerged. The first of these problems concerns what social scientists call ["class closure."](#) For the first and second generations after the revolution, there was unprecedented opportunity for upward social mobility. Sons and daughters of cane cutters, laborers,

prostitutes, and others at the bottom of the old society were able to get free educations and become doctors, engineers, professors, and leaders in their communities. They occupied positions vacated by the older professionals who had fled to Miami and new positions created by the economic development opened up by the revolution.

But by the 1990s, as a third generation came along, such opportunities for upward social mobility were diminishing. The children of the new professionals had a competitive advantage in gaining admission to the university, if only due to the higher cultural level of the home they had grown up in. And that meant that the children of other classes had reduced chances to move up in society themselves. The ranks of the professional class were becoming filled by the children of professionals. Despite meritocratic selection criteria, by the third generation, class closure was setting in.

Added to this is a second problem: the severe economic depression Cuba suffered in the 1990s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the regimes of Eastern Europe with which Cuba had had 85% of its trade, Cuba's economy shrank drastically overnight. The country suffered a decade-long economic depression at least as severe as the U.S. went through in the 1930s. Although there were great shortages of everything, income levels were maintained for much of the population by continuing to pay workers even when their factories could no longer produce due to lack of materials or spare parts with which to repair machinery. Nevertheless, there were no new jobs being created for that third generation just coming into the workforce. The economy could no longer support the large professional class that the revolution had built up. Professionals took jobs in tourism where they could have access to dollars, as the Cuban peso dropped in value. Universities cut back enrollments as their budgets shrank. And as a result, at the bottom of the workforce, a growing body of unemployed youth began to accumulate -- a dangerous situation for Cuba's future social stability. Even the children of professionals could not feel secure in maintaining the status of their parents. And many of the children of the lower classes felt they had little opportunity at all.

How did Cuba's leadership respond to this looming crisis? In the late 1990s, it went to the nation's mass organization of youth, la [Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas](#) (UJC), asking for new ideas. What came out of problem-solving discussions were a series of new programs that some have called a second educational revolution. The UJC established schools of social work for unemployed youth, "[Universidad para Todos](#)" [TV courses](#) were initiated, universities established extension programs, computer use was expanded in schools throughout the country, and a Battle of

Ideas was launched. In sum, there have been major efforts to raise further the cultural level of the Cuban people. Let me detail some of the programs a little.

Social Work for the People and by the People

The most striking program was the [social work](#) schools that were established throughout the country: "Hoy son más de 28 000 los egresados de las escuelas de formación de trabajadores sociales extendidas por todo el país" ("[La humanidad necesita de los trabajadores sociales,](#)" *Juventud Rebelde*, 10 September 2005). These took unemployed youth who had not been admitted to a university and paid them to go to school for a year where they learned to become social workers in the poor communities they had come from. Ruben Zardoya, formerly Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and History at the University of Havana, headed up the School of Social Work for the Havana area. Upon completion of their training, not only were they employed as social workers, but they also had the opportunity to continue their education at the university. A previously idle group had been given a socially useful role in helping to deal with the problems of their communities. Fidel calls them "[doctors of the soul.](#)" As a result of these schools, the number of social workers in Cuba has gone from 795 in the year 2000, to [28,000](#) with the graduation of this years class. And the unemployment level has gone down to 2%.

Now such programs have been extended to former sugar cane workers. [As Cuba has closed half of its sugar mills](#) because they are [no longer economically viable](#), thousands of workers have become redundant. They too are being retrained for new employment and receive a salary for attending school. Indeed, study is becoming a form of paid employment in Cuba. Parenthetically, I should note that this has caused some resentment among regular university students who were admitted on meritocratic criteria and are not paid for their study, even though it is free.

University for All

In addition, university-level study has been opened up to the entire population through two new educational channels that have been established. Combined with [Cubavisión](#) and Tele Rebelde, Cuba now broadcasts [394 hours of educational programming weekly, 63% of the total hours broadcast by Cuban television](#). This University for All, as it is called, makes available to the general population some of the nation's best teachers and thinkers. For example, I previewed some of the programs in a history of philosophy course prepared by [Miguel Limia](#)'s research team at the Institute of Philosophy. Since going on the air on October 2, 2000, [43](#) courses have been offered, using the talents of [775](#) professors, making this the biggest university in the country.

Beyond this there has been a metropolitanizing of the university. This is what we call extension programs that take higher education into neighborhoods in community centers and other satellite facilities. The university is no longer an ivory tower removed from society.

Raising the cultural and educational level of the entire population has become a central focus of these and other programs. As philosopher Miguel Limia told us, "We're betting on a society of knowledge." Fidel remarked in a speech last year about this educational revolution: "what began as an unattainable dream -- to see a nation become a university -- is today a reality" (qtd. in José A. de la Osa, "[Aggressions Have Become a Great School for Our People](#)," *Granma*, 9 February 2004).

Conclusion

The Cuban nation has been under siege for nearly a half century now. Under such circumstances, we might ask Bob Dylan's question: "how many years can a people exist?" It is testimony to the courage of the Cuban people that they have endured in their struggle for so long. In fact, it has made them stronger and more united. But then, they have no real alternative except to become a subsidiary of Miami, with a return to all of the inequality and injustice they once knew before the revolution. And that is unacceptable to the nation that Cuba has become, tempered by over a century of hard struggle. At a time when the social supports that enrich people's lives are being curtailed by neo-liberal governments everywhere else, Cuba has not only held on to the achievements of the revolution, in the area of education it has extended them further to the population. We ought to be learning from this "nation that is becoming a university" rather than trying to crush it.

For the past 16 years, **Cliff DuRand** has been organizing groups of academics for research in Cuba in conjunction with the Conference of North American and Cuban Philosophers and Social Scientists held each June at the University of Havana. He is now a Research Associate at the [Center for Global Justice](#) in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Morgan State University, Baltimore.

From: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/durand131005.html>

Course: Education

23043, DuRand, Cuba, a Nation Becoming a University, 2005

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